Employees and e-learning: what do the end-users think?

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Abstract

Within the majority of organisations, e-learning is now an accepted means of increasing skills and knowledge across the enterprise. Early adopters no longer think of themselves and their organisations as pioneers of a new and unproven method of training. For the most part they have seamlessly integrated e-learning into their training strategy along with all the other methods of delivering training. Even those organisations that waited until e-learning was proven are now enjoying the many benefits that e-learning brings. However, whilst much has been made of the benefits to the organisation of e-learning, there has been little, if any, qualitative investigation into the attitudes and views of the users themselves. SkillSoft embarked on an ambitious project to interview a broad spectrum of over 200 employees, across a range of organisations, in over 14 countries across EMEA. This article details the main findings of the research and shares the best practices adopted by organisations that have enjoyed e-learning success.

What drives employees to use e-learning?

Key to understanding the dynamics of e-learning is having an insight into what drives an employee to undertake the training in the first instance. In this survey, a spontaneous answer to the question of motivation was recorded to capture in participants' own words *why* they are doing the learning. As might be expected, the reasons offered were wide-ranging and differed from organisation to organisation. However, when analysed, there were a number of key groupings that became evident (see Figure 1).

The largest single reason given was to specifically enable the particular employee to be more competent and efficient in their day-to-day role. Thirty-four per cent of participants spoke in terms of needing skills to do their job better (e.g. "I wanted to raise my level of expertise in using the software") or to complete certain projects (e.g. "I needed to create a departmental Web site so I did the course beforehand to help me".

Learning new skills and broadening knowledge was given as a reason for learning by 16 per cent (and not necessarily for use in the workplace, although this is implied) and the majority of these mentioned technology skills specifically. Ten per cent of respondents are learning for personal development reasons, and 5 and 4 per cent, respectively, mentioned career development and accreditation. Four per cent said they learn simply because they enjoy it! For the remainder, the reasons were:

- refreshing existing skills;
- referencing what had already been learned;
- evaluating courses for others to use; and
- to set an example to staff.

For 20 per cent of the sample the training was compulsory, either because it was a regulatory requirement or because it had been mandated by the organisation as part of an individual's personal development plan. The interesting point to note regarding the motivation to learn is that this research suggests that even if we exclude this 20 per cent, the majority of employees *want to improve* the way in which they do their jobs and develop their personal skill sets. This can only be good news for those organisations investing in training.
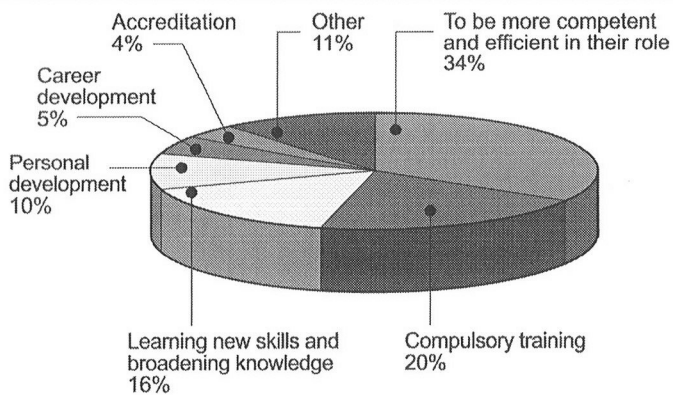
What sort of skills are employees acquiring through e-learning?

In line with the diverse nature of the participants and their roles and responsibilities, the range of expertise and knowledge being acquired covers the full spectrum of IT and business skills.

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Figure 1 The motivation to learn

All major IT skill areas are represented in the sample. Employees are using e-learning to develop skills across the wide range of general operating systems and network fundamentals, including Microsoft, Cisco, Unix, SQL and Lotus. Additionally, some employees are developing more sophisticated skills in Web development and programming languages in areas like Java, C++, C#, Frontpage, and Dreamweaver.

In relation to business skills, the picture that emerges is similar to the IT area. The users who participated in this study are using e-learning to help them with their professional and personal development across a wide range of competencies, including the following areas:

- customer service;
- change management;
- dealing with conflict;
- presentation skills;
- project management;
- accounting and finance;
- coaching;
- communication skills;
- motivation;
- teamwork;
- emotional intelligence;
- management;
- leadership; and
- marketing.

Where and when is e-learning taking place?

E-learning is, by design, available anywhere and at any time – as long as the learner has access to a computer and the Internet. However, in this study, although 17 per cent said they did their learning in a special learning area, the majority of those surveyed (68 per cent) did their learning at their desk, despite having access to a computer at home in most cases. Only 14 per cent said they did their learning mainly at home. The remaining 1 per cent

accessed courses in a variety of locations (see Figure 2).

In those cases where the learning is being done at home, almost all participants cite the fact that they don't have time at work, coupled with the lack of distractions in the home environment.

But for the majority, the learning is being done at work, most of it at the employee's own desk. Interestingly though, of those who learn at their desks, not all of it is being done during the working day, as might be expected. Of those who said they were learning at their desks, almost one third (31 per cent) were learning either before their working day started or after their working day had finished.

For these employees, who have no access to a dedicated learning area, it is difficult or impossible for them to learn during their normal working day. They all cite constant distractions and interruptions as the cause.

However, the remaining 69 per cent of employees who learn at their desk are a testament to the flexibility and convenience of e-learning. This group (who were the vast majority in almost all the organisations surveyed) all manage to fit their learning in around their daily responsibilities. Not surprisingly, these employees learn in small chunks, usually of between 10 and 30 minutes. They talk in terms of "I do it whenever I have a spare minute" or "I do it last thing on a Friday when I've generally finished everything I had planned for the week", and "I fit in it around my work – usually in the afternoon because the mornings are busy dealing with e-mails and calls".

What these findings point to is that employees are learning with little or no *formal* dedicated learning time. We found small pockets amongst the sample where individuals were given specific amounts of time by their managers to do some learning, but this seemed to be an informal arrangement rather than any definite policy to encourage specific learning time. The survey found that only one organisation set specific times aside for their employees to learn via e-learning. In this case, employees learnt in a training room in small groups at a set time each week for two hours. The benefit of this approach is that the employees

Figure 2 Where the learning is taking place
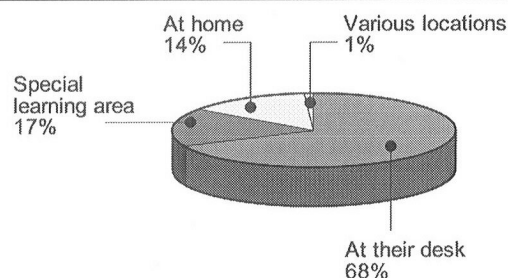
can share experiences and learn from each other whilst they are doing their e-learning, and at the same time they are diligently progressing through a given set of courses they are required to take. The employees look forward to their learning and their attendance rate at their scheduled training is almost 100 per cent.

The most important issue to consider when looking at where and when learning is done is to imagine how much more might be learned and how much quicker the learning might be accomplished if some dedicated learning time was made available to staff. This time need not be a set time every week, as in the above case (although this does seem to work well and the employees enjoy learning in this way): it could simply involve establishing a given amount of time that can be dedicated to e-learning during the working week. This would almost certainly have a significant impact on the capabilities and competencies of employees, which would in turn have a positive impact on the knowledge and skills base of the organisation concerned.

Does it matter if employees don't complete the courses?

The results of the survey found that the majority of those interviewed are learning in small chunks. Of the total sample, 34 per cent spend 30 minutes or less in one session, and 23 per cent say they spend an hour or less – a combined total of 57 per cent of the sample. Only 17 per cent say they spend more than two hours at a time taking courses. For the remainder of the sample, the amount of time they spend on their learning varies. Clearly, therefore, most of the courses being taken aren't being completed all at once. In fact, of those surveyed, only 23 per cent of the participants say they manage to complete a course in one learning session. The remainder (67 per cent; see Figure 3) give the reasons shown in Table I to explain why they are unable or unwilling to complete a course in one attempt.

Having established the amount of time spent on learning at any one point, the survey sought to ascertain whether the employees were learning what they needed to learn, given the apparent sporadic nature of their learning patterns. Each participant was asked whether they learned what they needed to, or what they set out to learn at the start *regardless of whether they had completed the course or not*. The results are unequivocal: 92.5 per cent of the total said that they had.

What this finding indicates is that employees are finding the learning to be effective, irrespective of whether or not they had completed the course.

Typically, for many of those interviewed, employees are dipping in and out of courses, skipping the sections they don't need and only learning what they need to learn at that particular time. This is particularly true where IT skills are concerned, for example in instances where employees frequently need to improve their skills immediately in just one specific area. For many of the employees interviewed, course completion is not something they consider to be significant, because as soon as they learn the skills they need, they often come out of the course to put the learning into practice at once, demonstrating the benefit of "just in time" learning.

Is e-learning effective?

Having established the range of skills that the participants were engaged in learning, and where and how employees learned, the research went on to determine how effective the learning had actually been. Each participant was asked whether they had used any of the skills they had learned from their e-learning course/s. An overwhelming majority (87 per cent) said that they had used or put into practice skills and knowledge they had gained from e-learning. To test the veracity of this, each participant was then asked to give an example of how and where this learning had been applied. In each and every case an example was cited, and in most cases more than one example was given. On closer analysis it appears that there are five major areas where the impact of the learning is being realised:

(1) Tangible business benefits – the respondents cited examples of increased sales, happier customers and an improvement in their negotiation skills.
(2) Improved processes – such as better project management, improved reporting, and more efficient contract management.
(3) Improved communications – both internally across departments as well as with customers and suppliers.
(4) Personal skills development – in key areas like management, leadership, coaching and mentoring, assertiveness, time management, and presentation skills (to name just a few!).
(5) IT and computer literacy – the skills base of employees, at both beginner and advanced level, has been significantly improved.

From this evidence, it is clear that the skills being developed through e-learning are making a real and positive difference, for both the individual and the enterprise. However, the findings also show that the learning and development isn't just
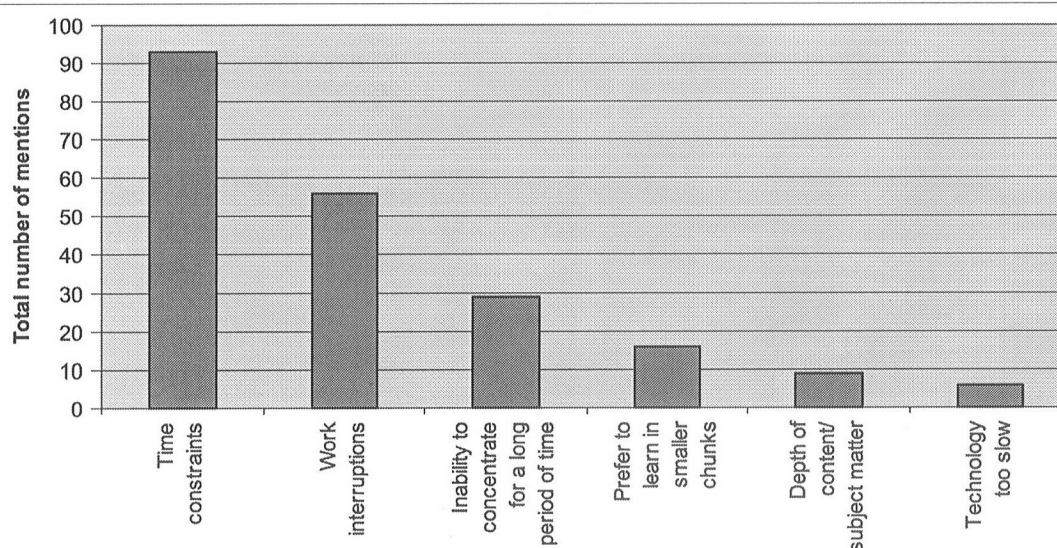
Figure 3 The debate about completion

Table I Reasons why respondents are unable or unwilling to complete a course in one attempt

Reason	Number of respondents[a]
Time constraints	93
Work interruptions	56
Inability to concentrate for a long period of time	29
Prefer to learn in smaller chunks	16
Depth of content/subject-matter	9
Technology too slow	6

Note: [a]Total number of mentions: respondents were allowed more than one answer and only those that had not completed a course in one session answered

restricted to those who take the courses. Having identified that the learning was being used, the survey sought to explore whether any of the learning was passed on to any other employee. Encouragingly, over half the sample (52 per cent) said that they *had* passed on knowledge and were able to give examples of what they had passed on and to whom. Generally, the learning is being passed on in one of three ways:

(1) By managers and supervisors to their teams and subordinates (e.g. "I gave a presentation to my staff – and coached them on – assertiveness and confidence building" – Team Coach, Prudential).

(2) By employees to their peer groups (e.g. "I had a colleague who was struggling with her workload. I passed on what I'd learnt from a Time Management course. She's now doing what I told her and says it's relieved a lot of stress" – Customer Accounts Manager, Intelligent Finance).

(3) By employees to their managers (e.g. "I passed on some of the behaviours identified in my leadership course to my manager" – Service Centre Unit Manager, Royal Mail).

Typically, the knowledge passed on covers practical hints and tips, concepts and theories, and advice on specific subject areas. These findings clearly indicate that the skills being developed through e-learning are making a real and positive difference for the individual as well as the enterprise.

Is e-learning enjoyable? What do employees like about it?

Each participant in this research was asked whether they had enjoyed the e-learning course or courses they had done. Given the widely held belief that if an employee enjoys their learning, they are more likely to remember it and use what they have learned, this finding was critical. A large majority (93.5 per cent) said that they had enjoyed the courses they had done, demonstrating the range of appeal that e-learning has.

Each participant was shown a series of statements about e-learning as a method of learning and was asked whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Against each and every feature, the vast majority of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, reinforcing and substantiating the benefits of e-learning:

- 93 per cent of those interviewed agreed that e-learning was easy to take at your own pace;

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- 73 per cent thought that it was an interesting way to learn;
- 77.5 per cent acknowledged the efficiency of e-learning for time-pressed professionals;
- 75 per cent agreed that it allowed for "just in time" learning, allowing them to learn on the job, as and when they needed to;
- 85 per cent held the view that e-learning offered a significant degree of flexibility;
- 87.5 per cent agreed that it was easy to use; and
- 69.5 per cent said that e-learning was easy to refer back to.

Would employees recommend e-learning to others?

People don't generally recommend something they aren't completely convinced about for fear of damaging their reputation, undermining their position or causing personal embarrassment. So to measure the depth of satisfaction about e-learning, the survey asked each participant whether they would recommend e-learning to a colleague: 98 per cent said that they would. This suggests that e-learning has proved itself unequivocally amongst those who use it. The reasons *why* the users would recommend it are, as expected, in line with the reasons why the users themselves like it: it's easy to use, it's flexible, the content is good, it's interactive, and it's an efficient and effective way to learn.

Where do the barriers to e-learning lie, and are they easily overcome?

This research clearly demonstrates the determination of employees to learn, regardless of the various obstacles in their way. But are the obstacles the same across all organisations, or do they differ by company or by geographical location? Each participant was asked to give a spontaneous answer to what they thought the barriers to e-learning were for both themselves and their organisation. Respondents were allowed to give more than one answer.

Predictably, lack of time was the greatest barrier cited by most, with 50 per cent of participants giving this reason. However, 47 per cent of the sample expressed the view that e-learning suffered from an image problem. There was a consensus of opinion amongst this group that there was a fear of technology and a lack of understanding about e-learning that was hindering a wider use of it within their organisations. One participant said: "A lack of understanding of how it works can put people off before they have started". Another went

further, saying: "The main barrier is taking the first step to do an initial course. Once that hurdle is overcome then people can't help but be hooked on e-learning" (Team Manager, Intelligent Finance). Forty-one per cent of the sample cited lack of self-motivation as a barrier, and lack of management support was mentioned by one third of respondents. Lack of awareness about e-learning and ignorance about what was actually available was given as a reason by 14 per cent of the sample.

Arguably, the most interesting point about the barriers mentioned is that – with the exception of self-motivation – most can be relatively easily rectified by HR and management teams. Given the right framework of reward and recognition, it is relatively easy to motivate users – and yet this need remains unidentified by many. In contrast, one of the exceptions amongst the organisations we surveyed has established a clear correlation between training and salary levels, firmly embedding e-learning into their competency model. Not surprisingly, this organisation's e-learning programme enjoys a consistently high level of usage.

Conclusion

At the time of our interviews and while writing this article, the economic climate continues to be tough. Cut-backs in staff numbers mean that even less time and fewer resources are available to remove employees from the workplace for classroom training. Training budgets are tighter too, with those responsible for training often facing budget reductions and typically finding that they are expected to train more employees with less funds. If it wasn't for the availability and effectiveness of e-learning, the task of training a diverse and geographically dispersed employee base would be almost impossible.

Without effective ongoing training, the ability of any organisation to compete successfully is under threat. Its competency and efficiency is reduced and the development of its intellectual capital is restricted. In an ideal world, a mix of classroom and online learning is acknowledged as the preferable route for employee development. But these are not ideal times, and the undisputable fact is that e-learning can equip far greater numbers of employees with the skills and knowledge they need than the classroom alone.

The emphasis of this research was on understanding the end-users' perspective of e-learning, with the objective of gaining useful insights into the reality of how it is being utilised by major organisations across Europe. Some of the findings surprised us. For example, we knew from anecdotal evidence that employees liked e-learning

– we just didn't know how much. To have over 93 per cent of respondents say that they enjoy e-learning and almost 100 per cent say that they would recommend e-learning to a colleague or friend should silence once and for all those who harbour doubts about whether e-learning has a genuine, universal appeal. Similarly, the evidence that large numbers of employees are undeniably learning in this way proves that not only is e-learning here to stay, but that as a method of training, it is delivering a significant return oninvestment, in its effectiveness as well as in monetary terms.

Appendix

The research methodology

Sixteen organisations using e-learning as a critical component of their training delivery agreed to contribute to this study: AT&T, Deloitte, FedEx, Hilton Group, Intelligent Finance, Lloyds TSB, Nestlé, Norwich Union, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Prudential, Royal Mail, Siemens, SchlumbergerSema, Telewest, Wolters Kluwer and Xerox. The research participants (204 users) were randomly selected by their organisations from a wide range of job disciplines and various levels of job grade. They were a mix of males and females and had a varied level of computer literacy. The only criterion was that each participant should have had some experience of at least one e-learning course within the previous nine months (which need not necessarily be a SkillSoft course).

Each participant was either interviewed in-depth, face-to-face, for a period of 20-30 minutes (68 per cent) or, where distances prohibited a face-to-face meeting, via the telephone (32 per cent). The interview was based around a structured questionnaire that consisted of both spontaneous and prompted questions, including a number of open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to express their opinions in their own words.